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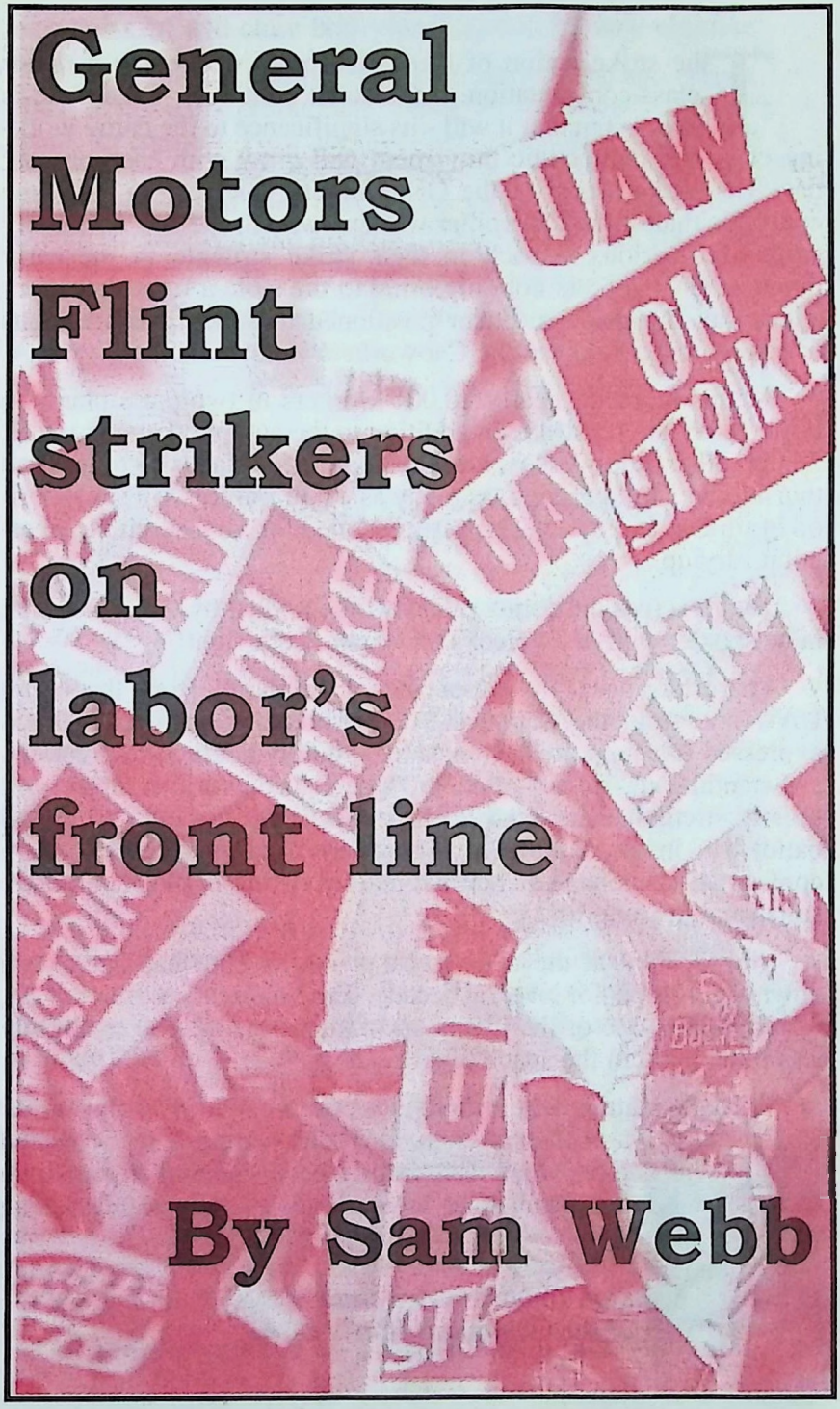
General Motors Flint strikers on labor's front line



By Sam Webb

The strike action of General Motors workers is a major class confrontation. If the strike continues – and there is every sign that it will - its significance to the entire working class and democratic movement will grow with each passing day. The strike action of the GM workers will not run the same course as that of the Caterpillar workers who in the end needlessly suffered a serious setback in their strike struggle in the early nineties. GM workers not only bring to the table a fighting history and spirit, but also are better positioned to squeeze concessions from their class foe than the Cat workers were.

At this moment, nearly 10,000 workers in two parts plants in Flint, Mich. are on strike. In addition to the auto workers on strike, 70,000 other auto workers are idled due to shortages of parts. And this number could grow to as many as a half million in a short period of time as supply lines of parts destined for final assembly operations dry up.

Yet all across the country, GM workers idled by the Flint strike have spoken with one voice: Their fight is our fight!

There has been an outpouring of solidarity from the entire UAW and from the Canadian Auto Workers. The AFL-CIO has expressed full support. There is a recognition that the Flint workers are standing up for all of labor. Indeed, a victorious strike will greatly strengthen its hand at the collective bargaining table and ballot box in the coming period, a period which promises sharp confrontations between labor and its foes sitting in plush corporate suites and in Congress.

Employment at the two struck plants in Flint has been on a downward slope for over a decade. Employment at Buick City, which houses one of the plants, has fallen from 13,000 to slightly less than 6,000 in the space of a decade.

To make matters worse there is no end in sight. Despite earlier agreements with GM that supposedly protected jobs, work has steadily been outsourced and little has been done to modernize either plant, raising

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fears that GM will close both plants as they become obsolete.

GM is still a highly integrated manufacturing corporation. Much of its parts production – roughly 70 percent – is done in-house. In contrast, Ford and Chrysler contract much of their parts production to semi-independent outside suppliers, most of whom are non-union and hire only cheap labor. They are increasingly located in countries like Mexico, Brazil, China and Thailand.

Not to be left behind, GM is now spinning off its parts operations to outside contractors. The losers in this corporate restructuring process are Black, Brown, and white auto workers and their families – not to mention cities, like Flint, where these workers live.

Since 1993, GM has laid off approximately 40,000 auto workers, including a disproportionate number of minority workers, despite modest growth in sales during the same period. This "uncoupling" of employment from sales and output is a new feature of the auto crisis. In earlier periods employment in the auto industry would rise as output and sales increased.

But with the widespread application of labor displacing technology, global outsourcing of parts, and speedup on the shop floor that link has been severed. Thus, in auto (and other mass production industries, for that matter) we observe the paradoxical situation of declining job opportunities accompanying rising output and sales.

This is certainly the case in Flint, where nearly 50,000 were permanently eliminated in twenty years. The issue of jobs, and, in a larger sense, the question of who is going to bear the weight of the restructuring process is the epicenter of the storm now shaking the auto industry.

In this context, GM's decision to secretly remove dies on Memorial Day weekend from the stamping plant in Flint and transfer them to another GM stamping plant in Ohio added to the class confrontation. GM did this in order to turn out parts for a new pickup truck launch scheduled for the summer. Not coincidentally, pickup trucks, along with utility vehicles, happen to be GM's best-selling and most profitable products.

Up until a few years ago, the transfer of dies would have been

nearly impossible for technical reasons. But with new flexible, multi-purpose technology, it is much easier.

(As an historical aside, GM's decision to begin removing dies from the Fisher body plant in December 1937 convinced strike director and Communist leader Bob Travis to order the occupation of the plant. Thus was born the historic Flint sit-down strike that broke the open shop at GM and set into motion a wave of strikes nationwide.)

GM has reported record profits in recent years. According to the Wall Street Journal, GM is sitting on $13 billion. This nest egg comes, and can only come, from one source: the unpaid labor of autoworkers, from the appropriation by GM of the value that auto workers produce in the production process, from heightened exploitation of workers at the point of production.

So if anyone is thinking that GM is a basket case, think no more because they are living better than ever before off of the labor of a quarter million GM workers.

Nevertheless, neither GM's multimillion-dollar executives nor their equally wealthy counterparts on Wall Street are satisfied with the pace of the restructuring process at General Motors. Accelerate the process, these scavengers of workers' labor say, no matter what the human cost. The main thing, in fact the only thing, they go on to smugly argue, is the corporate bottom line. Thus, by the year 2000 GM intends to eliminate another 50,000 jobs. And if sales don't hold up, which is quite possible, job losses will be simply staggering.

This is the new framework of the present day class struggle. The current strike is not a momentary blip on the screen, but rather a part of a larger and new pattern of class conflict. Since 1996 strikes similar to the present one at Flint have occurred at nine other GM plants.

This bitter battle now raging has its roots in GM's unceasing push for maximum corporate profits. It can very well be a defining moment for U.S. autoworkers and the entire working class. In which case, no one concerned about the future of our country should sit on the sidelines.

If I had a scorecard, I would say that the strike struggles in auto

have slowed down – but not stopped – the auto corporations' restructuring plans.

Despite winning much hailed job protection language in local agreements, job loss continues owing to the invasion of new labor-displacing technology, the consolidation of manufacturing operations, the outsourcing of production and relentless intensification of work. It's not to the same extent had there been no fight by the auto workers and their union, but it continues nonetheless.

Therefore, it's fair to ask what is needed to defend the jobs and living standards of auto workers. Simply answered: a consistent class-struggle strategy. The present strategy of the UAW is flawed in my opinion because it operates on the assumption that in a fully global, state-of-the-art, fiercely competitive, highly monopolized, and slow growth industry, job loss is as certain as night follows day.

In this era of corporate downsizing, job loss is as close as you can get to an iron law, say top UAW leaders. What follows from this – and the experience of the UAW bears this out – is a defensive and, in the long term, a less than fully effective strategy for protecting jobs and livelihoods.

What adds to the problem is that the negotiations have shifted from the international to the local union level. This puts local unions at a big, probably insurmountable disadvantage and eventually leads to whipsawing and concessions to the auto corporations.

We hear from time to time of negotiations between local unions and the Big 3, especially when a strike looms, but negotiations of this kind go on routinely, day to day. And while concessions may appear small, the cumulative effect is considerable.

If this were not the case, GM would not have provoked 25 strikes in the space of four years nor absorbed billions of dollars in revenue losses. Industry observers say if GM's entire North American operations are shut down the company will lose $300 million a week.

What then is needed to shift the weight of the restructuring process to the pocketbooks of GM and the other auto corporations? First of all, we need new demands that fit the new situation in the auto industry. Among the most important is the shorter workweek with no cut in pay – gains already won by workers in Germany and

promised by the new coalition government in France. A shorter workweek with no cut in pay would create tens of thousands of new jobs.

Other demands would include controls on outsourcing and new technology and public ownership of the auto industry under democratic control. Taken together, these measures would go a long way to alleviate the ongoing crisis in the auto industry. In the longer term, a full resolution of this crisis rests with "Bill of Rights" socialism – a society where economic wealth is in the hands of its creators – our nation's working people – and political and economic decision making reflects fully the democratic will of the vast majority of American people rather than the selfish interests of a handful of corporations and the super-rich.

Second, a broad appeal to all working class and people's organizations for their solidarity is absolutely necessary. The UPS strike demonstrated not only the utter importance of rank and file activity, but also the crucial role of public opinion and support to a strikes outcome.

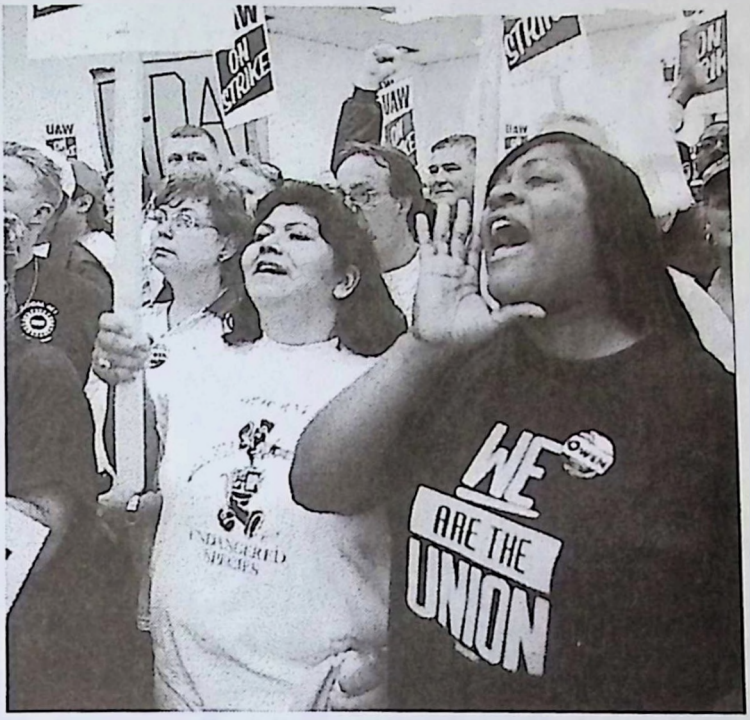
Perhaps two or three decades ago a go-it-alone approach was feasible, but in this new era of pitched class confrontation those days are long gone. Given the new conditions in the auto industry, the battle cry, "One Industry, One Contract, One Class," should echo on every picket line and in every local union hall and working class community.

The fragmentation of the collective bargaining process and the shifting of negotiations to the local union level are a recipe for disaster for auto and other workers in mass production.

In any event, the main task now is to win support for the striking workers in Flint. Neither labor nor its allies should wait for an invitation to express their full solidarity with these courageous workers. They are on the front line of the class struggle.

Etiquette and formality may be appropriate at the dinner table, but in the class struggle any formality that impedes solidarity should be dispensed with.

Their fight is our fight. If they win, we win. If they lose, we all lose. All out for the striking GM workers!



What you can do

1. Pass a resolution in your local union or community organization in support of the striking GM workers.

2. Invite a UAW member of Local 651 (810-742-7420) or Local 659 (810-232-4130) to speak at a meeting of your organization.

3. Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper supporting the striking workers in Flint.

4. Organize a solidarity caravan to travel to the picket lines in Flint.

5. Order and distribute copies of the People's Weekly World to your co-workers and friends.

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